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OO RUEHAG RUEHDF RUEHIK RUEHLZ RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHTH #1689/01 3531000
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 181000Z DEC 08 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY ATHENS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2938
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHMFIUU/HQ EPA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 001689

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SUBJECT: GREECE PLAYS HOOKY ON EU WASTE DIRECTIVES

REF: ATHENS 1457

1. (SBU) Summary: Greece's lackluster performance on waste management likely will result in another serious reprimand by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) for the country's inability to meet EU directives. Greece was referred to the ECJ on over twenty occasions in 2007 for a failure to implement EU legislation in general. With one of the poorest records of all EU member states on waste, Greece has made some inroads in improving its management system, but continues to face challenges in collection and treatment systems, both of which are managed by the municipalities. EconOff met with two experts, one from the GoG who works with municipalities and one from academia, to discuss this pressing issue and what Greece is doing to rectify its record. End Summary.

Background on Waste in Greece

2. (SBU) Greece generates close to 5 million tons of waste a year, 90 percent is disposed in landfills and the remainder sent to a compost. Greece has traditionally argued against incineration of its waste. Until the mid '90s, waste disposal in Greece included 4,850 dumpsites, 70 percent of which were uncontrolled. Deputy Interior Minister Athanassios Nakos recently announced that 1,454 illegal dumps have been shut down and work was underway to close and restore (clean up) 1,093 by the end of the year. To comply with a 2007 ECJ decision against Greece for 1,102 illegal dumps, he said the GoG shut down 806 dumps and were restoring 280 dumps.

3. (SBU) Some progress has been made in the area of packaging waste, (one-third of packaging is unofficially recycled), but the GoG still has a long way to go to fully comply with EU directives on all types of waste. Although municipalities have oversight over coordination and planning, twelve out of 23 municipalities are still not compliant with a 2007 ECJ ruling. Moreover, the European Commission announced that it will send Greece a final notice on another noncompliant waste landfill in the west of Athens. If Greece does not respond within two months, it could potentially face legal action in the ECJ and may have to pay steep fines.

4. (SBU) Greece has already been cited and fined for previous infringements. In 2000, the ECJ fined Greece a daily penalty of 20,000 euros, amounting to 4.72 million euros total, for an illegal dumpsite in Crete. In response, the government funneled the waste to a temporary storage waste site and closed the illegal site in February 2001. In spite of this measure, in 2005, the ECJ opened a new case against Greece for not closing the temporary storage site and for its inappropriate closure of the former site, both of which were judged to pose hazards to both human health and

the environment. Contrary to growing evidence of non-compliance by Greece, Deputy Minister of Interior Athanasios Nakos announced on December 13 at a solid waste management conference in Thessaloniki that "the unpleasant prospect" of fines being imposed on Greece by the ECJ over Greece's landfills was becoming more remote since Greece was making stronger efforts towards waste management regulation.

15. (SBU) In two separate meetings with visiting EUR Deputy Assistant Secretary Colleen Graffy in October, Members of Parliament (MP) from the Environment Standing Committee pointed to waste management as an area of concern on Greece's environmental agenda. (reftel) GoG interlocutors welcomed dialogue with USG interlocutors and potential engagement with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on how to implement best practices in waste management.

GoG Points to an Ineffective Waste System

16. (SBU) According to the 2003 National Waste Plan, the municipalities are responsible for collection of waste as well as waste disposal. However the issue also falls under the authority of Waste Management Authorities and larger associations of municipal authorities. The second level of local government responsible for waste management consists of prefectural authorities to coordinate on a regional level as well on waste management in order to get funds for public works projects. At the Ministry of Rural Development and Food, Dr. Triantafyllia Charitopoulou assists local municipalities in Greece with their strategic plans on infrastructure, water and solid waste management funded under

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a 6.7 billion euro EU fund.

17. (SBU) Charitopoulou said that municipalities know they need waste management alternatives. At present, each municipality has to pay a percentage to a waste management association before they get any government funds under a "polluter pays" principle. The problem with the system, she said, is that there is no incentive to encourage waste minimization, although some of the waste is supposedly separated into recyclable material and compost. Athens, which produces most of the waste in a concentrated area, still struggles with the placement of its landfills. (Note: The citizens of Greece continue to be strongly opposed to the creation of legally authorized landfill sites. End Note.)

18. (SBU) Charitopoulou said she worked on recycling efforts for Dora Bakoyannis when she was the Mayor of Athens. Under Bakoyannis, Athens had launched a public awareness campaign on recycling in Athens and developed three types of recycle bins based on material type. Materials and regular waste get placed inside bins, because people do not know what recycling is, according to Charitopoulou. However, she said that Greece was having better luck with commercial companies, which pay a fee to have their packaging material recycled. Greece has an EU-set target to recycle 25 percent of its waste by 2010; however, the majority of its recycling efforts are directed towards packaging materials versus solid waste.

Academics Concerned on GoG's Structure

19. (SBU) In a separate meeting with Polytechnic University Professor Maria Loizidiou, Loizidiou pointed to a convoluted government structure designed to deal with waste management. The overarching problem is the lack of political will and continuity. "Once the Minister goes, everybody goes. People that come in lose interest, no one cares, and those that have power to do things, can not do very much." (Note: Minister of the Environment and Town Planning Souflias has been criticized for not doing enough on the environment in spite of efforts by his Deputy Minister Kalogiannis. End Note.)

¶10. (SBU) Loizidiou said the Ministry for the Environment, Physical Planning, and Public Works (MinEnv) was putting the wrong priorities forward and overly emphasizing public works. It would help if a separate Ministry of Environment was created, Loizidiou recommended. She thought it was a mistake that the Ministry of Interior has been given oversight over solid waste management of municipalities, as it has a different set of priorities and stakeholders.

¶11. (SBU) Instead of a clear approach on waste management, Loizidiou said the Greeks are caught between locals who do not want the landfills in their backyard and strict EU directives. She underscored that if landfills in Greece do not meet these regulations, the landfills should be closed. Loizidiou said that 3,000 landfills in Greece were closed over the last several years in order to comply with EU waste directives out of several thousand that had been in operation. Four hundred landfills still need work to meet EU standards. If the landfills do not meet regulations, the EU will begin to impose heavy fines on those that remain unregulated. Loizidiou said she hoped that Greece would look at new technologies including the use of "thermal treatment," another name for incineration, as Greeks have previously opposed the alternative.

Comment

¶12. (SBU) The environment continues to take a policy backseat as a result of the Greek Government's structural inadequacies. With no ministry focused on the issue and potential musical chairs on the political scene, it is not surprising that Greece will continue to struggle with issues like waste management and recycling. Greece also continues to be the EU's problem child on the implementation of its directives. Given that a Greek --Stavros Dimas-- is at the helm of the Environment Commission and will continue to stay in that position for some time, it is unlikely that Greece will be able to continue playing hooky for long under Dimas' spotlight. End Comment.
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